United Nations ECE/CES/2018/27

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
6 April 2018

Original: English

Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians
Sixty-sixth plenary session
Geneva, 18–20 June 2018
Item 7 of the provisional agenda
Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

Strategic communications - We need to get them young

Note by Statistics Norway

Summary

This document discusses the opportunities arising for national statistical offices in the "post-truth" era to modernize their communication strategies and reach young people and children as future decision makers and data suppliers. The paper presents Statistics Norway's strategies in this regard, which aim to ensure its adaptability to the ever-changing environment, and build a strong brand of the national statistical office.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication", Session 1: "Strategic communications" for discussion.

GE.18-05369(E)

1805369

Please recycle

I. Background

1. Oxford Dictionaries declared "post-truth" as its international word of the year for 2016 after use of the word increased by 2 000 per cent in 2015. Oxford Dictionaries explained how post-truth can be used about phenomena where "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

2. The post-truth society can be considered a threat to enlightened public debate and people's ability to make informed choices based on research and facts. However, producers of official statistics should instead see it as an opportunity to develop new ways of thinking about communication and the dissemination of statistics.

3. Baldacci (2017) asserts that a communication strategy is not complete without adequate measuring instruments, but the challenge is that traditional key performance indicators (KPIs), such as visitor numbers to the websites of national statistics institutions (NSIs), user surveys of user needs and level of satisfaction, media reach, Facebook reach etc., will in all likelihood become less relevant in the coming years.

4. Google increasingly offers users the statistics and facts they are searching for directly rather than just providing a link to an NSI website. Dissemination services based on NSI open data solutions will be used to a growing extent in channels other than the NSI websites. Traditional media are in decline, and blogs, social media, YouTube and podcasts are becoming more popular platforms for people to get their news.

5. Modern communication strategies need to cultivate flexible technological solutions and flexible organizations with competent and flexible employees that will enable us to react and adapt to an ever-changing environment. Yet in addition, we should look for ways to be more pro-active. We need to be aware of which technological tools we and our users have at our disposal, which channels we should use, and which marketing and communication strategies we should employ vis-à-vis new and prospective user groups.

6. A stronger presence in schools and higher education institutions will also give NSIs greater insight into the needs and behaviour of future users. This will ideally position us to make more pro-active choices about how to disseminate official statistics to future generations rather than just continuing to react to present technological changes and the needs and expectations of the millennial generation.

II. Technological development

7. We cannot say for sure what technologies will exist a few years from now. Big data is becoming an important part of the source material in statistics production, chatbots may soon be a standard part of the user dialogue and statistics production and dissemination will be more automated. Technological developments will free up time and resources that we currently use in various manual tasks in our communication work. This will impact on how we search for and hire new employees. Our need for technologists, data journalists, brand builders and social media experts is growing more than for traditional tasks in connection with the day-to-day publishing of texts and content on Statistics Norway's website.

8. However, we will increasingly be at the mercy of algorithms, software providers, profit optimisation; all of which could potentially be at odds with the goals of NSIs and the needs of society. What we can plan for is our capacity to react and adapt to an ever-increasing pace of change. Nonetheless, there is a great need in this era of post truth for high-quality statistics and to inform the public about the important role of NSIs and official statistics in society.

9. The public sector is being digitised and public services are becoming more adapted to the individual. It is difficult to know how this development will affect the dissemination of official statistics, but the demand and development in the direction of more seamless public services will serve as a guide for the communication strategies in statistical agencies.

III. Millennials and post-millennials

10. 'Millennials (also known as Generation Y) are the generational demographic cohort following Generation X. There are no precise dates for when this cohort starts or ends; demographers and researchers typically use the early 1980s as starting birth years and the mid-1990s to early 2000s as ending birth years.' (Wikipedia, 2018). Post-millennials are a group that has not yet been given a common name, but Statistics Canada describes them as the first generation born after the internet became a natural part of our lives (Statistics Canada 2015). Post-millennials have, to an even greater extent than millennials, grown up in a time when technology has shaped lives and views on society and the world. A communication strategy that aims to reach this group of users cannot set long-term goals for just one or two communication channels. We must continue to create good, quality-assured content, but must be flexible in terms of which channels and platforms we use to communicate.

IV. New channels

11. NSI websites and traditional media may or may not be the primary channels for the dissemination of statistics in a few years. Nevertheless, we should not overlook traditional media. It is, and will continue to be, a path to credibility. In order to meet the demands of millennials, we will become increasingly adept at disseminating statistics via Facebook or other social media channels, creating our own YouTube channels and podcasts, providing our data in all the relevant formats, and using artificial intelligence-based software to respond to queries etc.

12. However, the question is whether we reach new generations through traditional media. The statistics on media use in Norway have shown a clear downward trend in the use of traditional news media and linear television by children and adolescents in recent years. News is consumed through social media, where it is easier to choose what to follow and what to disregard. NSIs will never be in the driving seat when it comes to adopting new communications technology; the media will always be one step ahead. We should first and foremost create content that is easy to share, disperse and link to other sites, such as videos, infographics, graphs and quotes from our statisticians.

V. Official statistics as a brand

13. Statistical agencies must think of "official statistics" and the agency's name as a brand. In the autumn of 2017, employees from Destatis, the Federal Statistical Office of Germany, wrote an insightful article presenting good arguments for statistical agencies adopting marketing tools as a means of ensuring that official statistics are recognised as a reliable source of information and building the agency as a brand (von Oppeln-Bronikowski, 2017).

14. A government-funded statistical agency is never going to have the same resources for marketing and branding as a commercial operator. We therefore need to find alternatives to commercial marketing. The basis for building our brand will always be to

produce good statistics, show that we are reliable, independent and objective. We then have to identify channels where we can reach existing and, not least, potential users.

15. We need to create "products" that are in demand by our target groups. We also need to catch potential users early so that the benefit of using official statistics as a tool and factual basis in discussions, education and life choices is understood from a young age. One of the goals of the communication strategy should be to reach as many potential users as possible while they are still at school.

We need to get them young

16. In this era of post-truth, the opportunity to select and evaluate the sources we use in the private domain, work and education is more important than ever. We must also question the sources used by users, be it an "influencer" in social media, a reputable journalist or the authorities.

17. The statistical agencies' contribution can be to improve "statistical literacy", familiarise pupils with the role of NSIs and the value of official statistics in society, and make official statistics a preferred source of factual information for them as they grow up and enter the workforce. We need to make them aware of the importance of contributing to the production of statistics when asked to partake in a survey (at least until all official statistics are based on big data).

18. The European Statistical System (ESS) project for Digital communication, User analytics and Innovative products (DIGICOM) has identified statistical agencies' common challenge by asking the question "How do we reach the new generation?". One of the sub-projects in DIGICOM focuses on reaching young people and creating targeted statistics, where the products are designed with the user group in mind. Statistics are a tool for understanding society, which everyone should have access to. They enable us to check claims, support our own arguments and debunk myths. Statistical agencies should ensure that their statistics are understandable to lay persons and inexperienced users.

19. In Norway, we know that a large share of the population has limited knowledge on statistics and mathematics, and this should be borne in mind when writing and disseminating statistics. The national statistical agency in Sweden, Statistics Sweden, has had great success with the service "Sweden in figures". The goal is to disseminate statistics and analyses in a way that is easy to understand. All text and other communication are adapted to the language comprehension and level of knowledge of a 15-year-old school pupil.

20. Statistics Norway will also make schools a target group for a simpler and adapted dissemination of statistics and analyses. Children and young people are the decision makers of tomorrow and potential suppliers of data for Statistics Norway's statistics. As such, we want to reach out to them and provide a solid basis to make decisions in their own lives. More accessible statistics will not only be of value to schoolchildren; we believe there is the potential to reach much broader user groups. However, we will initially focus on the defined target group of pupils and teachers.

21. A number of countries have school initiatives and different strategies aimed at reaching younger target groups. This work should be a strategic area in all NSIs' communication strategies. We recognise that many statistical agencies carry out work in this area, but it is often driven by enthusiasts and as a side-line to the main strategies. The dissemination work aimed at the emerging generation should be one of the pillars of the communication strategy, as it enables us to familiarise potential users with official statistics at an early age and to create better content that can also meet the needs of the generation

above. Content that is adapted to the level of an upper secondary school pupil is also highly likely to be suitable for users with no expertise in the relevant field.